

STORIED PICTURES: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INCIPIENT LEVEL OF PICTOGRAPHIC WRITING IN PRE-CONTACT HAWAII¹

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades scholars of Hawaiian studies are nearly united in their conviction that Hawaiians had no indigenous writing. A statement in a history of Hawai'i used in public schools shows the strength of this conviction: "Of course, the Hawaiians had no writing system ..." (Menton & Tamura 1999:77, emphasis added). However, scholars have not always been so sure about this. In the Director's Report of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum of Polynesian Ethnology and Natural History for 1907, the scholar John F.G. Stokes writes that, "it is not yet understood if the various Hawaiian petroglyphs are to be considered in the light of a written language" (1908:121). Similarly, Likeke McBride in *Petroglyphs of Hawai'i* assumes that priestesses of Pele used glyphs printed on *tapa* from which they would "recite the edicts of the volcano goddess" (1997:23). This, incidentally, makes sense of Menton and Tamura's statement that Hawaiian cultural transmission by oral recitation involved "[f]eats of memory that would amaze us today" (1999:77). In view of the fact that it is "anything but easy to provide clear definition of ... writing" (Coulmas 2003:1), and that "[e]very attempt at a single universal definition of writing runs the risk of being either ad hoc or anachronistic, or informed by cultural bias" (Coulmas 2003:2), how can we be sure that the petroglyphs of Hawaii do not represent an incipient level of pictographic writing? By reference to ethnographic analogy, it seems clear that a culturally similar people on Easter Island used similar pictographs as the basis of a logographic system called *rongorongo*.² Although "a complete translation of

rongorongo has eluded us" (McLaughlin 2004:89), and disagreement about its status as writing has raged for lifetimes (Gelb 1963:278, says no; Sahlins 1955, says yes), *rongorongo* is writing. Would we be able to recognize the incipient level of a pictographic system of writing? (Figure 1.)

McLaughlin (2004) shows that a possible source of individual *rongorongo* glyphs is the rock art of Easter Island. Despite all of the mystery and controversy surrounding *rongo-rongo*, it is a system of writing and we can see the origins of its individual parts in petroglyphs of the sort also produced in Hawai'i. The analogy is established by two parts of the process in Rapanui, encompassing the rock art stage of pictographic writing and its close cousin logographic writing, and the first part of the same process in Hawai'i. The backbone of the analogy is the cultural similarity of Hawaiians and Easter Islanders and the use of nearly identical glyphs in the rock art of the two places, especially the Birdman (Figure 2) and face mask motifs, but also the phallus and vulva (Figure 3), the fish hook and others. Is this enough to suggest a parallel trajectory?

CHANGE IN MY THINKING ABOUT THE PETROGLYPHS

This article represents my own experience with the petroglyphs, becoming aware of them, observing them, and thinking about them. I had worked as a translator of written Japanese before coming to Hawai'i for the first time in 1989, and had seen the early pictographic forms of the Sino-Japanese characters (Vaccari & Vaccari 1950). From my observations of the petroglyphs, primarily as photographic reproductions in texts, and from Gelb's definition of writing, human

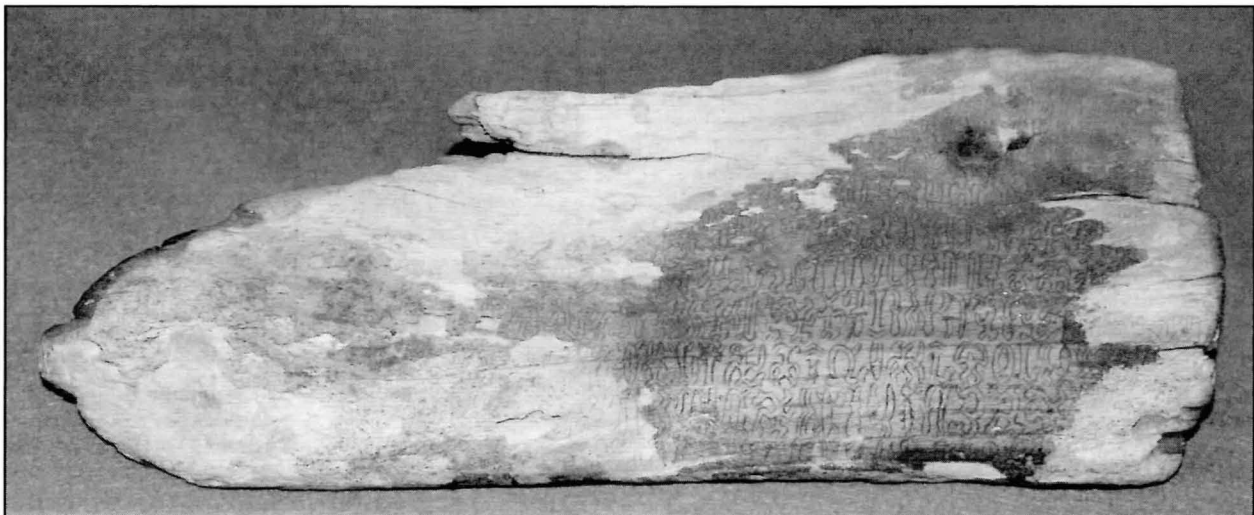


Figure 1. Honolulu Tablet ("3629"). Photo by Shawn McLaughlin.

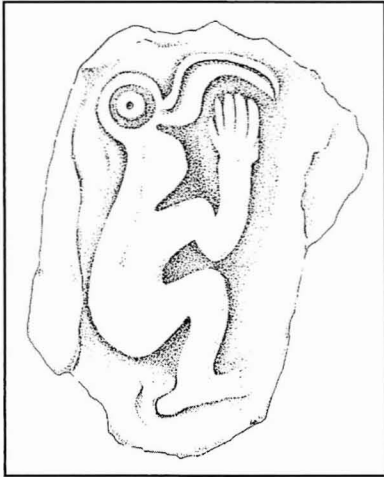


Figure 2. A typical birdman from Easter Island showing the bent-knee crouching pose of a human form with bird head and gular pouch. Carving is in deep bas relief. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 11.18.)

communication by conventional marks (1963:12), I assumed that the petroglyphs represented the first stage of a pictographic system that would have developed as it had on Easter Island. I had seen an ethnographic film of the !Kung San in which an elder had read rock art for John Marshall — it was a story of a hunt with pictographs of the animal and handprints to show how to advance on it. As a result I expected the Hawaiian petroglyphs to exist as art and writing at the same time.

My next step was to discuss the petroglyphs with scholars of Hawaiian studies. I found a general consensus around the idea that the Hawaiians were not a literate, but an oral, people, and that they just did not have writing. As I spoke with others on this question I realized that none of us had a good notion of what the early stages of a pictographic writing system would be. This propelled me into the question of the essence of writing, which I considered from my awareness of the development of Chinese characters. I concluded that writing was a representation of things, not words. Since working as a translator of Japanese I have studied Mandarin in conjunction with its writing system. Many Sino-Japanese characters have different pronunciations in Japanese, Mandarin, or Cantonese, for example, but retain a single meaning across societies, and are essentially abstracted, stylized pictures. Because the earliest of all human writing is pictographic, then at least for the earliest of writing, writing is a representation of things, not speech. As Coulmas (2003:196) characterizes the beginning of writing, “it is rooted in pictures, and ... it happened several times”. This means that standardization of the pictographs, and associating their meanings in the minds of the people, through hundreds of years of drawing them, is a part of the process of creating a writing system.

Throughout my process of thinking about the petroglyphs I talked about these ideas in class and listened to the responses and opinions of Native Hawaiian students. Most can see the petroglyphs as pictographs when presented with material on the invention of Chinese characters and the idea of pictographic writing, and its development on Easter Island among a Polynesian people, the Rapanui. In addition, one student volunteered that she had seen, in the handwriting of the Hawaiian scholar David Malo (1793-1853), the use of pictographs intertwined with English script, as in a hand-

written sentence about fish in which a drawing of a fish is used in place of the written word in the sentence.

The petroglyphs have been carefully described in recent decades (Lee & Stasack 1999). The next step is to understand what shape the incipient level of a pictographic system would take. We need to decide what writing is to a society on its threshold. Our primary methodological tool is ethnographic analogy, to Rapanui and *rongorongo*, and also to systems such as the Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian system in which we can see the birth and the development of pictographic writing from its earliest forms. Do the Hawaiian petroglyphs change over time in the same ways that other systems have developed?

Having come full circle on the question of the Hawaiian petroglyphs, convinced by scholars of Hawaiian studies that the Hawaiians had no writing, I saw a lecture on “The Dancing Men”. Conducted on community access cablevision, two people argued that there had been a widespread writing system in the Pacific, known since contact times as “The Dancing Men”. They hinted that there had been a phonetic component: a set of pictographs of things and well-known human activities that were associated with the initial sounds of the words they represented, and that a set of thirteen was sufficient to indicate the phonemes of Hawaiian. Were they referring to the existence of the *rongorongo* tablets of Easter Island and the “wooden tablets of aligned glyphs ... known as *taparakau*” on the island of Ra’ivavae (McLaughlin 2004:91)? This suggests that Pacific islanders were on the threshold of writing in at least two places at the time of contact. It is not likely that the *rongorongo* of the tablets was the result of stimulus diffusion from the West, considering its complexity and the amount of time it would take that to develop, its unique form, and the ecological collapse of Easter Island society that predates contact. More importantly, writing such as the Cherokee script that resulted from stimulus diffusion after western contact is not pictographic or logographic. Cherokee script follows the same principle as western writing, that of representing the sounds (in this case, the syllables, of speech; see Coulmas 2003:69-71). Why invent thousands of logographs when you’ve learned it can be done with a few dozen re-combinable elements?

Cox and Stasack (1970:52) remind us that the petroglyphs

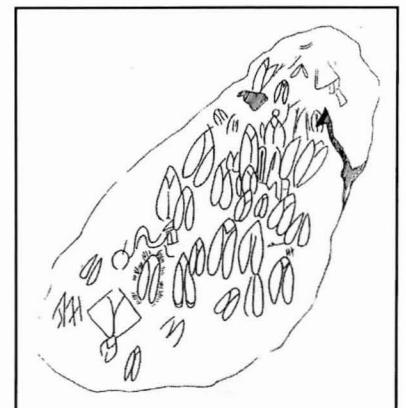


Figure 3. Numerous incised vulvae (*komari*) cluster on this boulder from Easter Island. Komari are the most frequently recorded motif in the island’s rock art. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 11.17.)

were either brought to Hawai'i by the earliest arrivals, independently invented by them, or introduced by later arrivals. It is concluded that, "an early introduction of a simple form from the homeland of the Hawaiians seems the most reasonable assumption" (Cox & Stasack 1970:52-3). Dating of the rock art on Easter Island and the Hawaiian petroglyphs is problematic. We cannot date either with any certainty. However, in Hawai'i there is "sufficient evidence that they were being made in the period just prior to discovery" (Cox & Stasack 1970:53), and that the "petroglyphs ... date from around the time of first settlement and continue up into historic times" (Lee & Stasack 1999:156). *Rongorongo* may have already been forgotten at first contact on Easter Island, the disastrous visit of the Dutch in 1722 (Van Tilburg 1994:29), but the tablets suggest a long prior period of development. Polynesian peoples, who are connected by pan-cultural ties of adaptation to island societies and common origin, were developing in pre-contact times a set of symbols that would develop into *rongorongo*-type logographic scripts if called upon by the socio-economic and cultural conditions conducive to writing, and if not interrupted by contact.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE DISCOVERY OF PARALLEL CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

In anthropology today, we do not fail to recognize economics in a society, for example, just because it fails to display the accouterments of western economic systems. Nor

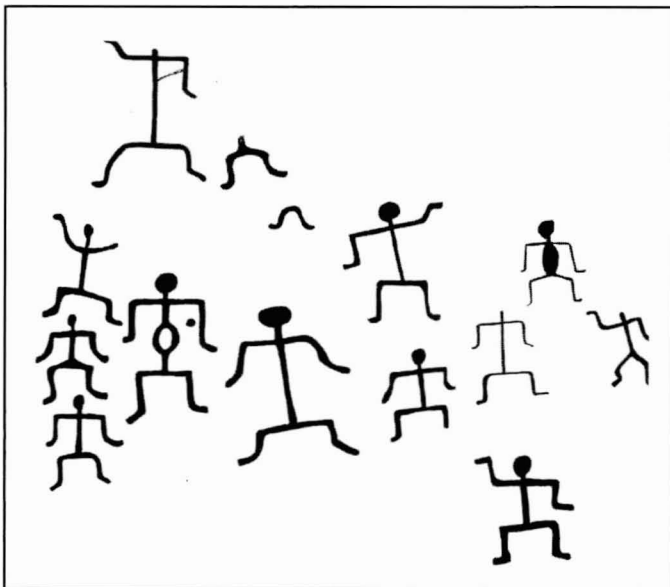


Figure 4. A panel of lively anthropomorphs, one with a circle torso. Boulder 2. This panel measures 127x50 cm. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 8.23.)

do we fail to recognize religion because it differs systematically from Western religion. Yet, initially, we often did so. In fact, the history of anthropology has been a process of

discovering these parallel institutions in other cultures after first failing to recognize their existence. I argue that in the case of writing we fail to take account of writing systems that are fundamentally different from our own phonetic system, and that we probably would fail to recognize a pictographic system that was still in its earliest stage.

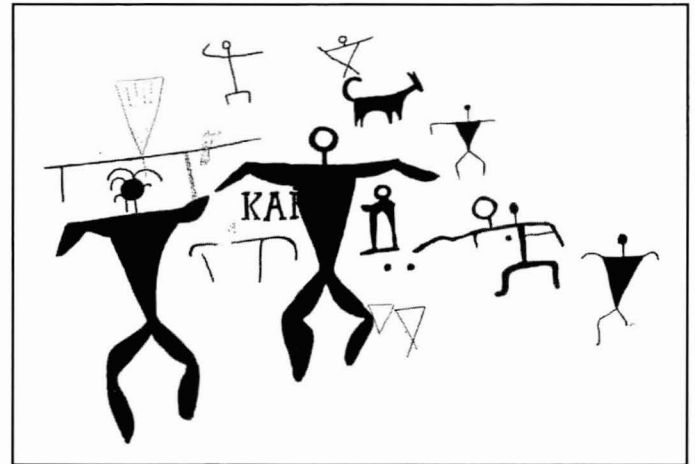


Figure 5. The north side of Boulder 12. Two large muscled figures over other images plus lettering. This panel measures 124x84 cm. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 8.32.)

"There is little reason to believe that writing means the same in different linguistic and cultural contexts" (Coulmas 2003:2). It is also clear that we cannot assume that writing "has not changed substantially" (Coulmas 2003:2). We must look for something that is significantly different from western writing and be able to chart its growth if we are to understand it. Gelb's seminal work is still a starting point for any discussion of writing (1963; cf. Coulmas 2003:16). Using an archaic term, Gelb writes that, "what the primitives understood as writing is not the same thing as what we do" (1963:12). Westerners think of writing as a representation of speech sounds, but the beginnings of all independently invented systems of writing are pictographic. For example, Coulmas (2003:46) shows that Sumerian writing began with pictures of objects, and that grammatical information and "abstract ... meanings were added later by metaphorical extension". In the earlier stage, this writing "is syntactic and has no direction" (Coulmas 2003:49). Sumerian pictographs, in place by 3200 BCE, finally took a "fixed format from left to right in horizontal lines" as logographs only by the "middle of the second millennium BCE" (Coulmas 2003:49). The beginnings of Sumerian writing are "crude pictures" of "natural objects and artifacts" such as cattle and clay vessels (Coulmas 2003:192). "When these pictorial signs were given a linguistic interpretation, writing was born" (Coulmas 2003:192). As such, it may be argued that the first writing is the writing of things, not the words used to represent those things.

There are similarities between *rongorongo* glyphs, Indus Valley script, and ancient Chinese inscriptions (McLaughlin 2004:88-9). The similarities illustrate the same basic processes

that must be undergone in order to create a pictographic system, expressed by McLaughlin (2004:88) as parallels that result from “the human appreciation for and expression in symbolism”. There is further evidence in this same vein: Rudgley (1993:20-1) shows that early rock art has common design motifs, including the motif identified by McLaughlin (2004:93) as parallel wavy lines that is used in the Sino-Japanese system to indicate river.

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In a well-known story of the Hawaiian islands, when presented with a piece of paper on which his name was written in English script, King Kamehameha responded; “This does not look like me, nor any other man” (Hale 1998:505). This is what someone would say who expected writing to be a picture. The feats of memory mentioned earlier also suggest that a natural development would be a mnemonic device, the function often attributed to *rongorongo* tablets.

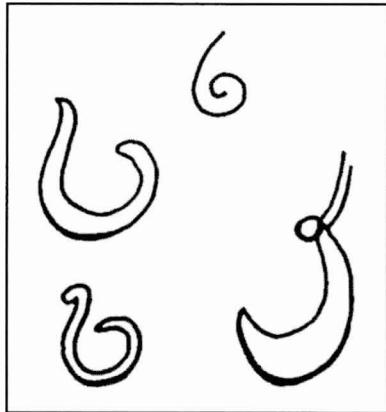


Figure 6. Items of material culture. Fishhooks. (From *Rock Art of Easter Island* Fig. 3.13.)

Such a system, especially while still in its earliest stage, would be known only to an elite few, probably healers, leaders of religious ritual, and priests and priestesses. Yet, these are among the first to die in an environment beset by communicable disease. It is recalled that a rapid population decrease was initiated by Cook's first voyage and that, on the return trip, he himself noted many afflicted. Those

whose lives are threatened make their way to healers who recite the chants. Those with esoteric knowledge may be among the first to lose their lives. It has been written that, “at every level of society there were secrets” (Lee & Stasack 1999:5). If we could only see the “variety of kapa” intended for use in the next world that Kapi'olani examined with Judd (Judd 1966:145)! At this examination of the objects and *tapa*, Kapi'olani was “very much excited, and ... entertained us with stories” (Judd 1966:145, emphasis added).

There is a sequence of styles recognized for some motifs. In the case of the glyph that means “human being” — “the stick figure anthropomorph developed into a triangle-bodied figure” (Lee & Stasack 1999:157). In addition to being a “stylistic evolution” (Lee & Stasack 1999:10), this is an elaboration of the number of motifs. In the Sino-Japanese character system, there is a representation of human being that is a stick figure (Figure 4), and a representation of female human being that adds a triangular body (Figure 5). This

suggests that both would ultimately be used by one seeking to elaborate the system. All writing starts with pictures and all pictographic systems begin by developing abstract, stylized motifs over time. This evolution of the pictorial representations of things is part of the process.

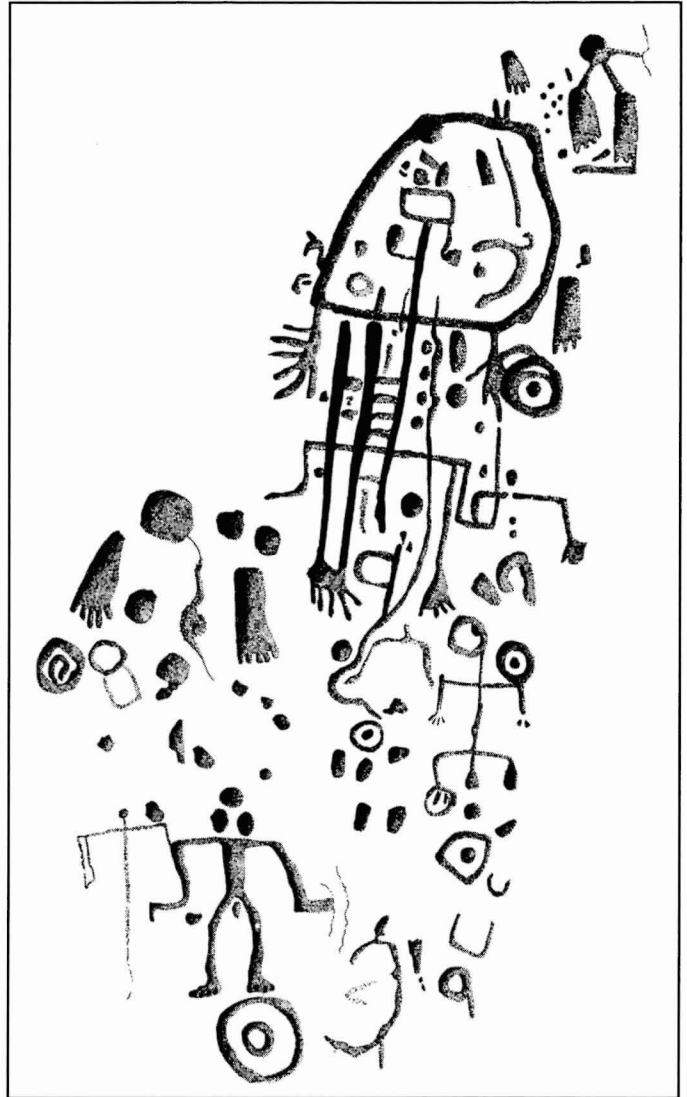


Figure 7. Panel in Section 1 showing a variety of motifs and much superimposition. Note the large and small foot motifs, circles, and anthropomorph with two dots on each side of the neck. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 5.12.)

The four-stage sequence for petroglyphs in Hawai'i is 1) stick figure anthropomorphs; 2) anthropomorphs with a triangular body; 3) anthropomorphs with form attached to suggest muscle and body mass; and 4) copperplate lettering (Lee & Stasack 1999:10-1). Bas relief, found also on Easter Island rock art, is likely the next step in the progression (Cox & Stasack 1970:59-61). The appearance of the copperplate lettering is significant because Hawaiians saw fit to place it

with examples of their own pictographic writing. If the things are unlike, why place them together? This is the placing of like with like, and suggests that the Hawaiians saw their own writing as a distant cousin of Western writing.

A RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE HAWAIIAN PETROGLYPHS: STORIES OF RIVALRY, GENEALOGY, HISTORY, AND TECHNOLOGY

For the purposes of this paper, it should be noted that many of the petroglyph motifs in Hawai'i are similar to those used in Easter Island, first in rock art and then in *rongorongo*. In addition to the Birdman and eye mask motifs, Lee and Stasack identify a number of motifs that are important in *rongorongo*, including the phallus and vulva, the fishhook (1999:63) (Figure 6), and the foot (1999:16) (Figure 7). Of the two societies, one used these motifs to create more conventional writing. The other was in the process of doing so.

We understand the petroglyphs better, and we gain a way to move forward in the study of them, if, instead of writing that the petroglyphs are *images* of maternity (cf. Lee & Stasack 1999:91) or that they are *depictions* of maternity, we instead realize that they are *stories* of maternity. These stories would be recited in the presence of the petroglyphs that represent them and detail the parts of their telling. That is, instead of saying that "figures may depict birth or family connections" (Lee & Stasack 1999:91), we should realize that these were actual stories of birth and family connections that were known to culture members at the time, genealogy that is, and that these real stories were recited at the time in the presence of the glyphs. This is incipient pictographic writing. If, on Easter Island it was necessary to have a period of rock art before more systematized writing could be produced, then the rock art is a part of the process of creating a pictographic script.

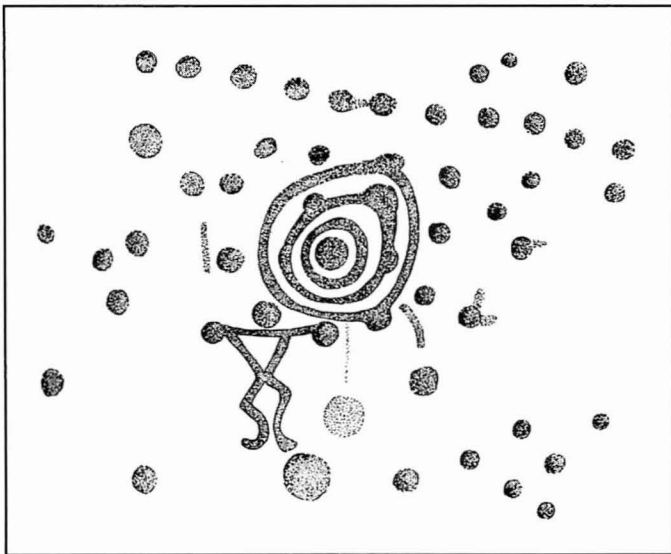


Figure 8. Cupules, concentric circles, and a figure that has cupules for hands and head. (From *Spirit of Place* Figure 7.37.)

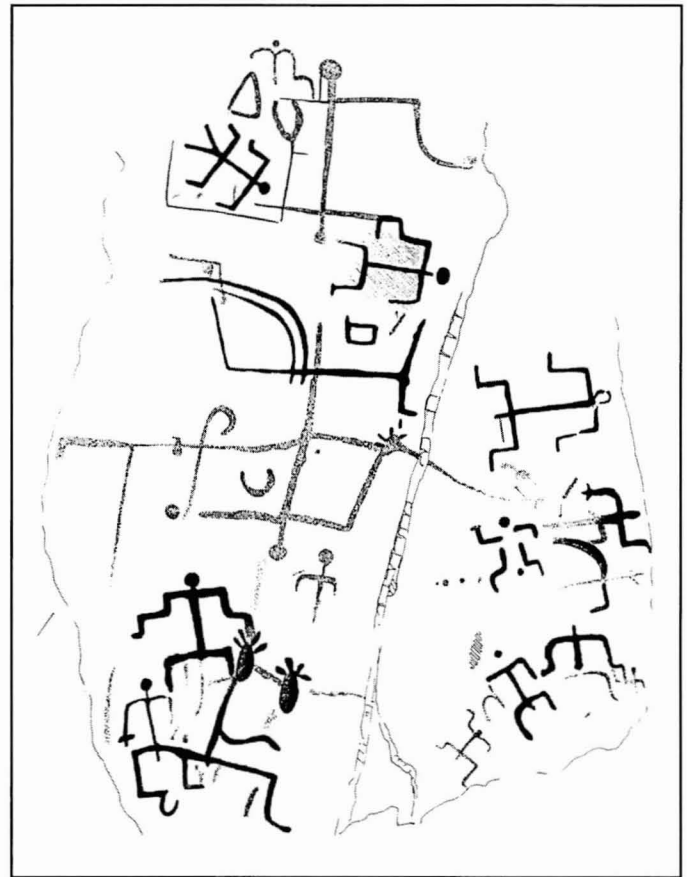


Figure 9. This panel measures 2.8x2.2 m. Deeply carved feet are superimposed on stick figures. Shading indicates intentionally-abraded areas. (From *Spirit of Place* Figure 3.30.)

The idea has been put forth that *poho*, as well as circles with attached cupules such as those found at Pu'uloa (Figure 8), are part of a habitual system of birth records (Lee & Stasack 1999:87). Although these are not examples of pictographic writing, they must correspond to oral recitations of stories of these maternity events. Almost all early writing systems begin with accounts of genealogy. If a visiting woman accompanies a local woman to the place of her birth records, then oral recitation is prompted by the record system, strengthening the connection in the minds of culture members between marks, habitual or conventional, and discourse.

The idea that the petroglyphs are grouped along the Kao boundary can be explained. It is at a political border, one *kapu* to cross, that we might expect oration about rivalry, success in military competition, and so forth, to be of importance and shouted across the border. Such oration is made manifest by a pictographic representation of those events. The events would include stories of battles, and individual or collective heroism. This "neutral zone" (Lee & Stasack 1999:21) is probably a place for recitation of stories. It has been suggested that rituals of clan and status transformation were conducted at Kao 1 (Lee & Stasack 1999:24). If so, then the petroglyphs used would be a key to the recitation of those stories.

The Kalaoa panel has been assumed to be a representation of a “battle scene” (Lee & Stasack 1999:51). Would Hawaiians who knew the story of this battle remain silent in front of this panel? Rather, they would recite the story with reference to the particular points on the pictographic representation.

Why the superimposition (Figure 9) of one set of petroglyphs over another (see Lee & Stasack 1999:51)? In the same way that people speak over each other or replace a weekly magazine on a coffee table, the subject of importance changes over time. As a new battle story becomes more important than an older one, it is superimposed to supersede the older and rewrite history. This was the Hawaiian version of providing the newly revised edition of a book. For some time there may

be culture members who know both stories, then a time when the under story is forgotten and only the top is remembered and recited. In our current time, both are lost.

Taken together, the various petroglyph sites on Hawai‘i Island comprise a book of different types of stories, with chapters we know as petroglyph sites where certain types of material are collected. At some sites are recorded stories of battle and rivalry, others are stories of genealogy. Still others are stories of technologies, such as those of kites, and those of ships found along the coast “from Puna to Kohala” (Lee & Stasack 1999:66) (Figures 10 & 11). Altogether, we have a book of the subjects Hawaiians saw as important enough to warrant manifestation in writing, with many stories in each chapter, some superimposed.

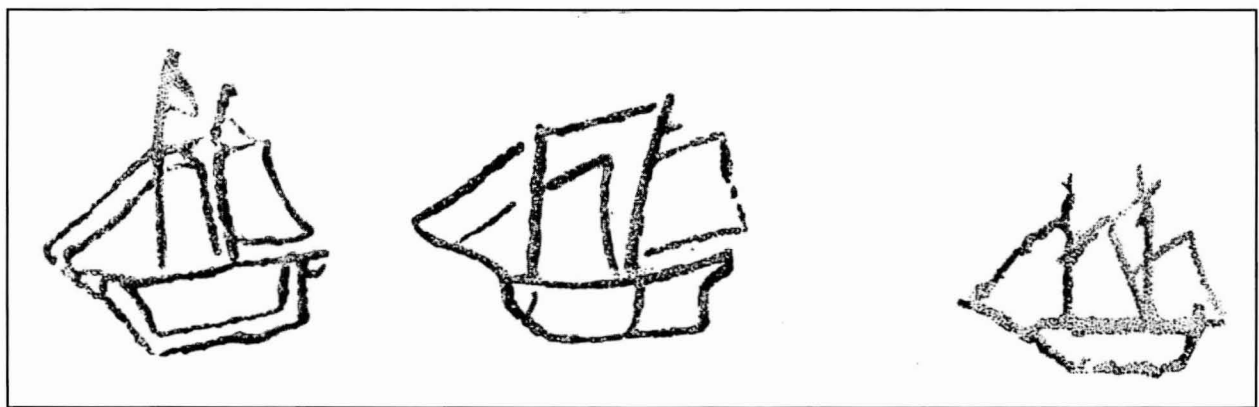


Figure 10. Petroglyphs of sailing vessels from the Big Island; these date from the late 18th to early 19th century. The images are found along the coast from Puna to Kahola. There are none at Kealakakua Bay where Cook anchored, perhaps because there is little suitable rock surface in that area. (From *Spirit of Place* Figure 5.20.)

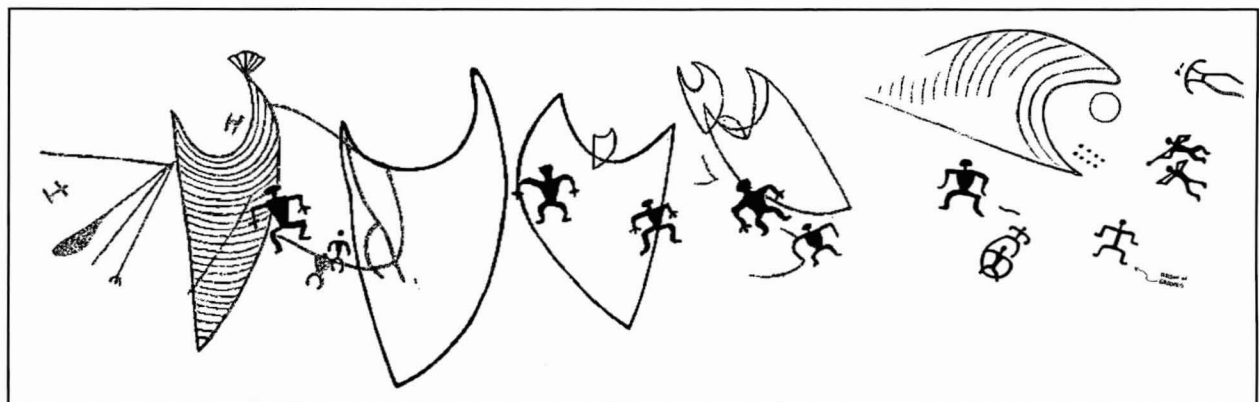


Figure 11. This panel is without parallel in all of Hawai‘i. Crab-claw sails are interspersed with anthropomorphs, an oar, and a trident far left. Two sails show ribbing, one with a tassel. Two figures at far right appear to be holding objects and the figures themselves display variations: One has a detached head, four others have fingers, and one on the right has an open body form. Note the circle and cupules near the sail on the right. This panel measures 9.0×2.5 m. (From *Spirit of Place* Fig. 6.5.)

The site called “maternity hill” (Lee & Stasack 1999:19) was a place for stories of maternity. This may also have been the place for maternity-related prayers to the gods. In this respect, the *poho*, while not itself writing, is much like a blank word processing file into which the story of a human being is placed. Other types of patterned depressions include those in which games were played. They are possibly marked to facilitate recitations of stories of games, but are not as advanced a form of human intercommunication as are the petroglyphs.

The fact that copperplate writing, the fourth stage in petroglyph production in Hawai‘i (Lee & Stasack 1999), was placed near much older petroglyphs indicates that Hawaiians saw it as a relative of their emerging system. Names were undoubtedly recognized by local people from among the petroglyphs. The different types of heads at Puako (Lee & Stasack 1999:18) are evocative of names of Oglala Sioux on their pictorial roster (Gelb 1963:38). Although they differ in detail, each has a symbol next to a head in order to identify individuals. Although they are communication by habitual, not conventional, marks, they are the necessary prior step to communication by conventional marks, which is to say, writing.

Lee and Stasack (1999:1) cite R.K. Johnson to the effect that “petroglyphs ... were ... a beginning toward pictographic representation”. Whether or not any Hawaiians put them on *tapa* to aid in feats of recitation, as McBride (1997) suggests, they were the keys to the telling of stories and chants at these petroglyph site locations. It has been noted that secrecy of esoteric knowledge was important in Hawaiian culture (Lee & Stasack 1999:5), and this is probably why early ethnography does not reveal the activity.

“It appears [petroglyphs] were deliberately created in those places where some ritual was involved” (Lee & Stasack 1999:7). Here I argue that much of that ritual was oral recitation that was keyed to the petroglyphs. As time went on, a closer, more detailed relation between the habitual marks (petroglyphs) and the verbal recitation would take shape, leading to a more conventional system. No system of writing, no matter how developed, is completely conventional and without habitual features. And, even the most incipient system is not completely habitual, because the very idea of the representation of things with marks is itself a convention. If we think of habituality and conventionality as two ends of a continuum along which all writing systems fall, then we realize how difficult to judge when one stops and the other starts. Early systems must logically fall somewhere in between habitual and conventional. As Coulmas (2003:191) puts it, the “idea of writing emerged bit by bit, only gradually revealing its potential”.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

As mentioned, Likeke McBride (1997:23) recounts the story of Kapi‘olani’s visit to Kilauea volcano in 1824, in which a priestess of Pele recited chants from glyphs printed on *tapa*. “When Kapiolani in turn looked at the paper the priestess held and couldn’t comprehend the symbols, she denounced it

as a fraud” (McBride 1997:23; see also Judd 1966:143). In presenting the thesis of Cox and Stasack (1970:Foreword), Kenneth Emory writes that the petroglyphs “helped to put man on the road to writing through the development of symbols”. This is a recognition that Hawaiians were developing and standardizing a pictographic system.

Research by Penny Moblo (1997) is part of the mountain of circumstantial historical evidence for the idea that an early level of pictographic writing would not be recognized by Westerners, in the early contact environment — or even later. Moblo’s (1997) ethno-historical analysis suggests that Westerners have a pervasive need to see themselves and their cultural institutions as superior to those of the indigenous peoples they acculturate. The many films in which Father Damien was mythologized speak to an assertion by Westerners that they were needed by Hawaiians due to the innate superiority of their institutions. As Westerners rejected Hawaiian religion, music, dance, and other visible cultural elements, could they possibly have recognized or valued the incipient level of a pictographic writing system? More likely they would identify the petroglyphs as a crude and unsatisfying art form. Specifically, they would expect writing to be a representation of speech sounds, as do most people familiar with Western writing, and would reject the idea that pictographic representations of things can form a system of writing.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY AND EASTER ISLAND *RONGORONGO*

For some time, the evidence for phonetic elements in *rongorongo* was mixed. It now appears that rebus writing was taking place. This is a valuable example of how quickly, within a few hundred years perhaps, people begin to use pictographs, then established logographs, for their phonetic value. Nonetheless, *rongorongo* is a logographic system, developed from a pictographic one, that is called writing. The fragmentary nature of the evidence probably accounts for differences between Gelb (1963) who rejects it as writing, and Sahlins (1955:1051) who trusts the judgment of Alfred Métraux that there were “*rongorongo* men who read the Easter Island script”. Sahlins is not surprised that modern Easter Islanders do not know the script. He adds that ignorance of the statues and stone adzes by modern residents is easily appreciated “in view of the early disastrous effects of contact” (Sahlins 1955:1045). In Easter Island an even more developed form of writing than that evidenced in Hawai‘i was lost to the indigenous people.

Easter Island remains the closest source of ethnographic analogy for a consideration of the Hawaiian petroglyphs. Many of the same motifs were being created in the two places, as shown in Flenley and Bahn (2003:51), including the Birdman and eye mask motifs, although the latter is rare in Hawai‘i. This may be independent invention but could represent the diffusion of motifs resulting from the migration of Hawaiians and Rapanui from a common pan-cultural area. It is also likely that the content of Easter Island writing will

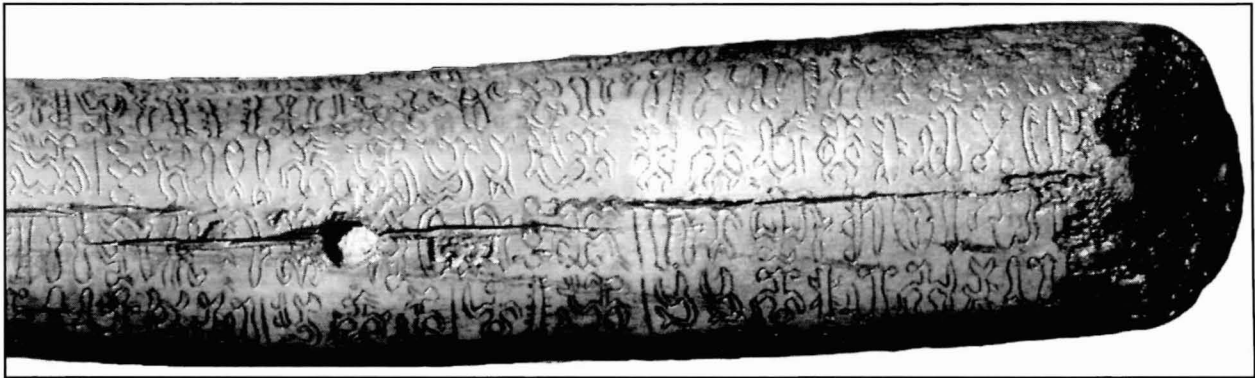


Figure 12. Santiago Staff. (Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, Santiago.)

presage Hawaiian cultural concerns and the content of the Hawaiian petroglyphs. Steven Fischer (1995) has argued that the *rongorongo* on the Santiago Staff (Figure 12) contains “a creation chant, a cosmogony, that is a whole succession of copulations, which account for the creation” (in Flenley & Bahn 2003:189-90). Thus, concerns of genealogy and name glyphs, common to all early pictographic systems, are the most likely content of Hawaiian petroglyphs. The phallus and vulva are important glyphs for the telling of genealogy and are evident in Hawai‘i as well as Rapanui.³

Of the ancient Easter Island petroglyphs, Lee (2007:129) writes that “[t]hey may have functioned as a sort of communication system and many were associated with legends”. If we recall, from Gelb (1963:12), that writing is communication using conventional marks, then this communication, if conventional, is also writing. How can we decide to what extent the habitual has evolved into the conventional? Because we cannot easily do so, we should avoid saying that the incipient stages are not writing. That the Easter Island petroglyphs were “associated with legends” (Lee 2007:129) suggests that, as in Hawai‘i, the petroglyph sites were arenas for recitation. Over time, a more conventional relation between petroglyph and discourse evolves.

Analogy to Native American rock art and pictographic writing is problematic but important. We do have evidence of pictographic writing among Native Americans, as in the case of names from an Oglala Sioux roster (Gelb 1963:38). There may be evidence of the second step in the process, that of taking the pictographs and using them to make inscriptions. Scholars of pre-contact Native American cultures should be encouraged to look for a sequence similar to that displayed in the Easter Island case, where the progression of rock art into more conventional writing is shown. For Mesoamerica and the Maya, “... pictures ... were gradually given linguistic interpretations” so that “[w]riting grew out of drawing” (Coulmas 2003:196).

PAUL GAUGUIN AND *RONGORONGO*

There is evidence that one Westerner, an artist, made an effort to use *rongorongo* as writing to communicate meaning

on a cultural and personal level, in at least some of his art. McLaughlin (2004:89) identifies one painting, called *Merahi Metua No Tehamana* (Figure 13), one woodcut, and one wooden sculpture in which Paul Gauguin used *rongorongo* glyphs in his art.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) put roughly a dozen *rongorongo* glyphs in his painting *Merahi Metua No Tehamana* (“Tehamana Has Many Relatives”). The glyphs are in two rows above a portrait of Tehamana, Gauguin’s wife. There are eleven visible, with Tehamana’s head blocking an area that would contain one or two more, although one of the glyphs is partially off the edge of the painting and may actually be two (one and a fragment of one). Though the meaning of this set is cryptic and the glyphs may be primarily ornamental, the possible meanings of “seated woman”, “king”, and “beat the drum” (Freches-Thory 2004:37) are not out of line with Gauguin’s usual subject matter.

Gauguin took these glyphs from a list of *rongorongo* glyphs and their meanings created by Monsignor Tepano Jaussen (Peltier 2004:59), referred to also as Bishop Etienne “Tepano” Jaussen (McLaughlin 2004:87). The list was obtained by Gauguin in France at an exhibition of colonial artefacts (Freches-Thory 2004:37). The *rongorongo* tablets are thought to describe genealogy, and this meaning may be Gauguin’s intent given the painting’s title. Freches-Thory (2004:36-37) shows the Tahua tablet and a list of glyphs taken by Gauguin from it, via Jaussen, that are used in the painting.

In the painting called *Pape Moe* (“Mysterious Water”), Gauguin’s meaning expressed in *rongorongo* is more clear. Peltier (2004:54, 58-59) argues that the two *rongorongo* glyphs in *Pape Moe* are a reference to Tehamana’s infidelity and Gauguin’s discovery that his hooking of two tuna in the lower jaw was seen by locals as an indication that his wife Tehamana was unfaithful during his, the artist fisherman’s, absence. Peltier (2004:54) writes that he “in fact returned home to discover the infidelity of ... Tehamana”.

In *Pape Moe*, there is a fishhead near the margin over two *rongorongo* glyphs which correspond to Monsignor Jaussen’s list as the shark god and the fish hook. In the composition, Tehamana is seen drinking from behind. Peltier’s (2004:59) interpretation of the *rongorongo*: Tehamana learns that the

tuna (via the shark god?) had informed Gauguin of her infidelity. The fishhook is shown as the upper figure just below the fish head.

It is only with the greatest of caution that we might interpret the use of *rongorongo* by Gauguin. Essentially the entire body of material only goes to show that once, one man assumed that *rongorongo* was writing and made use of it, primarily as ornamentation and as he saw fit, not as it might have been used by the Rapanui.

PROCESS OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

The way in which the petroglyphs could have worked as an incipient level of pictographic writing is as follows: Hawaiians would create the petroglyphs to represent the thing, name, activity or story that they were concerned with and focusing on at the time. Later, Hawaiians would approach the petroglyphs, perhaps with an initiate or a child in tow, and would speak the thing, name, activity, or story that the petroglyph represented. Over time the petroglyph would come to elicit a more specific discourse as people learned to verbalize it.

We don't know why petroglyphs in Hawai'i are so concentrated in terms of location. Were these special places for story telling? It is likely that there were recognized places for the telling of certain types of stories and this must have been a regular part of Hawaiian cultural transmission. Often those who used the petroglyphs for instruction would be parents, taking children to the site of a battle or birth to tell them the tale. The initiates might also be the students of *kahuna* or military experts. Much of the content would be genealogical and religious.

Over generations of time, this process would become regularized, and the petroglyphs would bear a closer and closer relation to the discourse they represent. That is, they would become closer approximations to speech by the addition of more petroglyphs and greater agreement (*i.e.*, habituality turning to conventionality) on how to give the name or story in speech. This is the development of an incipient level of pictographic writing. It is worth noting that early Egyptian hieroglyphs were not written in rows or columns, but scattered onto a surface so that the order had to be learned (Coulmas 2003:170). In other words, the writing is without "clear correspondence between the flow of speech and the linearity of the hieroglyphic script" and the hieroglyphs "are sometimes switched in their order for reasons of better spacing" (Coulmas 2003:170). A writing of the name "Cleopatra" uses four sets of pictures scattered among other disparate sets that write other names (Coulmas 2003:171). Gelb (1963:279) also mentions an early Indian system in which "the pictures are often drawn without any clear order". Thus, we cannot expect early writing to be in rows or columns.

Although we cannot know this, over time the Hawaiian culture might have produced a system similar to *rongorongo*, primarily dedicated to facilitating oral recitation and, over time, phonetic elements would have been associated with the glyphs, allowing for phonetic representation of Hawaiian

speech, as in the idea of "The Dancing Men". Some of this may have been happening in esoteric contexts. If, on the other hand, we assume that Hawaiians had no writing, then we blind ourselves to a full appreciation of what it is that they did have, and we miss the view of the very beginnings of a developing pictographic system.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I argue that the petroglyphs of Hawai'i are the earliest, incipient level of a pictographic writing system. They primarily represent a stage in which pictures become abstracted and stylized by convention, a necessary precondition for using the glyphs in writing as script and a process that may take hundreds of years. In Easter Island, we have the parallel process: petroglyphs become the components of a logographic



Figure 13. Gauguin: "Merahi Metua No Tehamana". (Currently among the holdings of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois.)

script used to facilitate recitation of lengthy genealogical chants. There are too many points of parallel comparison here to be able to say, as we do, that the Hawaiians had no writing.

Writing has been invented independently by societies in at least four parts of the world, including China, Egypt,

Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica (Coulmas 2003:209). When we count *rongorongo* there are at least five, including Polynesia. All world societies were at one point not literate, so it is misleading to say that the Hawaiians were not a literate people. The stigma of this, faced by Hawaiian and part Hawaiian students in compulsory education, is undeserved.

This theory points to a direction for future research.

Scholars of Hawaiian studies might fruitfully attempt to match the oldest known myths and chants on particular islands with particular petroglyph clusters at known sites. There may be ethno-historic evidence such as ancient *tapa* that can be appreciated now that we have an idea of what to look for. To say that the Hawaiians had an incipient level of pictographic writing is not much different from saying that they had no writing at all. The nuance, however, is highly significant. The roots of writing are pictures. Why not realize that the roots of the storied pictures of Hawai'i are part of the tree of writing?

NOTES

- ¹ Pictographic writing is the predecessor of, and blends into, logographic writing. In the latter, pictographic representations of objects have become abstracted to the point that the original object may not be recognizable and so the logograph must be learned. In addition, more advanced logographic writing includes some logographs that give grammatical or phonetic information. Conceptually, pictographic writing represents objects, logographic writing represents words. There is, however, considerable overlap between them because objects are always associated with words. Also blurring the distinction is the fact that some pictographs need to be learned and some logographs continue to be recognizable as pictures. Most evidence in Hawai'i points to the pictographic stage, whereas *rongorongo* is understood to be logographic in its developed examples but based, as are all independently invented systems of writing, on a pictographic stage.
- ² Concerning the cultural similarity of Polynesian peoples, it should be noted that there is less similarity between Hawai'i and Easter Island than there is between Hawai'i and the Marquesas Islands or Tahiti (see Lee & Stasack 1999:161).
- ³ Of concern in a more intensive analysis of these motifs would be their quantification, in order to determine the degree to which each motif is represented in Hawai'i and Easter Island. Vulvae and fishhooks, for example, are numerically more prevalent in Easter Island despite the greater overall number of documented petroglyphs in Hawai'i. For the purposes of this discussion of pictographic writing, however, it is sufficient to note that even if a motif is not numerically prevalent, just a few examples would make it available for use in a later elaboration of the system.

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“ Easter Island will always be here
to remind us that not everything
can be solved. ”

— Alexander Henriksen